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Hancock United Church of Christ

“A Human What?”

It was my senior year in college, and this was the first time I was starting any sort of spiritual discipline in my life. I committed myself to praying every morning as I woke up And I stuck to my commitment fairly well, even though I had a lot of trouble, including not knowing really how to pray, what to say, how to focus, among other things. But I did notice that in the days when I skipped my morning prayer, I felt different during the day. I couldn't quite explain it, but I just felt not as centered; not as focused; not as aware.

My small periods of trying to pray in college seem like nothing in comparison to what Jesus did in the scripture passage: I mean, he spent all night praying! And, Jesus does this before two of the most important things in his ministry- forming a community of disciples, and preaching Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount.

We don't really know exactly what Jesus was doing on the mountain. Some questions come up- like: was one of the disciples there? How was Jesus praying? Was it silent prayer, verbal prayer, or some form of meditation? Well, we don't know, Scripture is mute on that point. But, what we can be pretty sure of is that Jesus is not really “accomplishing” any task, getting any chores done, or crossing things off his to-do list. He doesn't seem to be Doing much.

So, given that Jesus seems to be spending time just Being, I would like to pose to you the question: What do you think it means to spend time just “being” instead of “doing?”

One interesting tidbit that might help us figure this out is in the passage today from Exodus 3, where God says to Moses that God's name is: “I AM who I AM.” And, if you remember your English grammar, “I am” is the verb “to be” conjugated. So, in a very real sense, God is the ‘I Am,’ or Beingness. And, what else do we say that God IS? Well, we say that God is also love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, mercy, & goodness. So, if God is love, peace, etc; and God is Beingness, then doesn't it also follow that beingness is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, mercy, & goodness? Its like a triangle, and we could use it interchangeably!! So, we have a working definition of Beingness as love, joy, peace, etc. Let's start with that and stick with that for a while.

If Beingness is love, peace, joy, etc., then what is the difference between time spent “being” instead of “doing?” This is an interesting question to investigate more deeply in our culture.

Many foreigners I know who first come to our culture are somewhat taken aback by how fast many of us go & how much some of us work. Some might even call us human do-ings rather than human be-ings.

If you will allow me, I would like to pose some situations to help us consider this question of what our culture values. In the following scenarios, which of the following options are more common in our culture? #1: 60-70 hours of work a week, or a daily spiritual practice every morning & evening? #2: Spending intimate alone time talking & listening to a loved one, or watching TV? #3: Having intentionally peaceful, mindful meals, or meals spent multi-tasking?

You know, actually, these scenarios pose more questions than they do answers. Because,

is it impossible to practice being while we are overworking, or while watching TV, or while in the midst of multi-tasking? Can't we just BE during those times?

These are the questions I started out with as I was writing this sermon- and you know what? I realized that I was asking the wrong questions! There is no such thing as practicing being. We cannot practice being. Being is simply what we are! Remember how the verb "to be" is conjugated: I am, You are, He/she is: At core, You are love, He is peace, I am joy; and nothing can change those core truths! We can't do anything to change who we are as God's creation; we can either remember or forget who we are. We are a reflection of God. We are love, we are peace, we are joy- and we either remember or forget that- plain and simple.

Some things that we DO, like spiritual disciplines, are kind of tricky. Take meditation, for example: When you meditate or pray, you may during that time remember that you are love- which is what you have always been. But, just because you meditate and remember for a time that you are love, doesn't mean that you always remember that you are love. Or take listening to music. Music may help you remember that you are peace for a time, and even carry over for some time during the day and help you remember that you are peace. But that doesn't mean you always remember that you are peace.

I'm not saying this to put down any spiritual disciplines or practices- in fact, they help us to remember who we are. But, I am saying that Beingness is not a particular activity, a particular spiritual discipline, or even a choice: It is simply who we are. And, nothing you or I do can change who we are at core. We can forget who we are, and act out of that forgetfulness. But nothing can ever change our beingness- which is a reflection of God and who God is. You already are Pure Spirit; Pure Beingness: peace and love and joy and patience and kindness. All you need to do is to remember who you already are.

The movie Coach Carter which I watched this past week was a beautiful illustration of this. Coach Carter saw in the boys on the Richmond High School basketball team a great potential. He saw in them a future beyond just sports, and beyond prison or gangs. He saw love in these boys when many other people, and even these boys, did not see this in themselves. Coach Carter saw that at the core, what these boys were was love. And so, he saw infinite potential in them, even if their school was ranked on the very bottom of the state scale for academic performance. Coach Carter knew that even though these boys could forget who they were, that would not negate the truth of who they were or their potential.

If I can stretch this example for a second: Imagine that God is Coach Carter. Coach Carter was more aware than these students were of the love inside of themselves and their own potential. God, too, always knows that you are love- God has never forgotten; God is more aware than you of your own potential. You see, we are often like Coach Carter's students- forgetful of who we are, forgetful of our potential; but God is never forgetful of this.

So, you see, Beingness is not at all about Doing anything: It is simply who you are. And so, the only question about your Being is: Do you remember or forget who you are?

Now, if I am correct; if nothing we do can affect who and what we are at core, then why did Jesus spend the whole night praying? Well, here's the thing about being and doing. Through certain things that we do, such as spiritual disciplines, it can be a whole lot easier to remember who we are. Why? Well, take meditation for example: It can be a whole lot easier to remember

who we are when we take time to quiet the noises around us and inside of us competing for our attention. Or, take the mindfulness practice: It can be a whole lot easier to remember who we are when we go slower and take out time to notice what's around and inside of us as opposed to when we rush and do not pay attention to anything inside or outside.

Even Jesus, who we use as an example of faith, had spiritual disciplines, and took times to be quiet and go slow. In the scripture he spent all night in prayer. Jesus had practices he DID to help him remember who he was. This is where spiritual disciplines, certain things we do, can likewise help us to remember the truth of who we are.

Jesus was extraordinary. In every moment Jesus remembered who he was and so manifested love, kindness, patience, forgiveness, etc. Jesus didn't only remember that he was love when he prayed on the mountaintop. Jesus remembered that he was love at all times: even amidst the hustle and bustle of life far away from the silence of the mountaintop. In that sense, Jesus' whole life- everything he was doing- came from a remembrance of who he was- from attentiveness to the truth of his being.

We too, are called to constant remembrance and mindfulness of who and what we really are. We are called to follow Jesus' example, and Jesus sets a high standard for us in John 14:12: "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these!"

Now, I should give you a warning here: beginning the process of being mindful of who we are; of constantly remembering who we are; is not easy. Well why, you ask? Because we have habits! We've been conditioned by our culture, by our homes, and our schools to DO, DO, DO, and GO, GO, GO, and to not be mindful or aware but rather to go super-speed and to multi-task.

We can't smell the roses if we are not even aware that the roses are there!

We've developed habits in our life that are not conducive to noticing what is going on around and inside of us; our fast paces and crazy schedules are sometimes so frantic that we may be tempted to say: "Remembering who I am? Being mindful? Ahh, let me see when I can fit that into my schedule!"

Someone like Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist Monk who teaches about mindfulness, might tell us to start slow: practice having mindful meals or mindful walks; practice breathing mindfully- being aware of your own breath; and soon, being mindful will become your habit! Soon, you will brush your teeth mindfully, wash the dishes mindfully, even drive your car mindfully: remembering who you are!

There is a great truth in what St. Paul says in Romans 7:15: "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very things I hate." Actually, this is somewhat natural: you see, we all have habits ingrained inside of us; the more time passes, the harder it is to get these habits to change. That is where developing a spiritual practice or discipline can help: It allows us to practice new habits: of being reflective; of being aware.

If we continue along your everyday path as we always do, there is little likelihood that our old habits will change. But, making room for new habits that are designed to help us remember rather than forget, gradually helps us begin to come to a greater and greater level of awareness of who we are each day. And the more we remember who we are, the more it will be instinctive to act from love, and patience and goodness and peace- because we are always mindful

that that is what we are.

Today, as when I was in college, spiritual practices are still important to me. They help me to be more aware of the truth of who I am and to live that out. But, there are days when I skip my meditation periods in the morning or evening for various reasons; and there are times when I don't always feel centered; there are plenty of times when I forget- when all of us forget- who we are. And as a result of our human tendency towards forgetfulness, we have meditation practices, mindfulness practices- all sorts of spiritual practices- geared towards fostering new habits in us- ones that help us remember who we are. Not only to help us remember that we are love and peace and goodness and joy, but that we are beings who need rest and who must take care of ourselves too. As we do our best to foster new habits that lead us towards remembering and awareness; be patient, as God is infinitely patient and gentle with each one of us- because drastic shifts usually don't happen overnight.

And remember that even though we may forget the truth of who we are, God never does. And, as long as one of us holds the truth about who we are, the truth will prevail. Amen.